Turbidity Currents and Seabed Morphology

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LONG-TERM GOALS

Our main goal is to assess the hydrodynamics of turbidity currents and mudflows and their ability to produce morphological features such as ripples, dunes, antidunes and gullies along their paths. Of particular interest is to elucidate the role played by turbidity currents on the inception of submarine channels and canyons. To this end, understanding the mechanics of sediment erosion, including bedrock, by density currents is another long-term goal of this research.

OBJECTIVES

Our main objective is to advance our understanding of the seabed morphology associated with the passage of turbidity currents and mudflows. Different morphological features encountered in the marine environment are related to the action of bottom currents and turbidity currents. Large fields of long-wavelength, upslope-migrating bedforms observed on submarine channel levees are attributed to the action of unconfined turbidity currents that overflow channels and canyons and spread sediments across levees. Although it has been largely argued that such sediment waves, with ripples superimposed on them, are the result of downslope-flowing density underflows, the origin of such features still remains under debate.

APPROACH

Our approach consists of a combination of theoretical analysis, numerical modeling, and laboratory experiments. Stability analysis with multiple scales was used to investigate whether supercritical conservative density currents are capable of developing long-wavelength, upstream-migrating bedforms. Laboratory experiments were performed in the MARGINS TANK to observe if conservative density currents and depositional turbidity currents are capable of developing bedforms at different scales such as dunes and ripples, as well as long-wavelength, antidune-like, sediment waves. Two- and three-dimensional direct numerical simulations of a discontinuous density current propagating down a slope, were conducted to assess the role of mixing on the flow dynamics.

WORK COMPLETED

A theoretical stability analysis has been completed using conservative density currents capable of transporting sediment as bedload as well as erosional turbidity currents Fedele and Garcia, 2004a,

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2004b). Comparison of maximum growth rate curves for the above mentioned cases, as function of Richardson number, show that turbidity currents tend to form longer sediment waves than those associated with conservative density currents with bedload transport only. The analysis has been extended to account for the role played by the flow turbulence in the development of bedforms by adding a conservation equation for turbulent kinetic energy.

More than thirty laboratory experiments were completed in the MARGINS TANK for:
a) wide turbidity currents emanating from a line source and producing incipient gullies, and b) channelized turbidity currents generating a range of bedforms from ripples to dunes and antidunes.

Several two- and three-dimensional direct numerical simulations of discontinuous density currents were conducted.

RESULTS

Results obtained from the bed stability analysis indicate that both conservative and non-conservative supercritical dense underflows are able to develop long-sediment waves that migrate upslope, resembling antidunes (Fedele and Garcia, 2003). Figure 1 shows the components of the complex celerity of bed perturbations, as a function of wave-number (K), for a density current. In this figure, growth rate ($C_I > 0$) indicates that long sediment waves are likely to develop, whereas the celerity ($C_R < 0$) indicates an upstream migration for these bed instabilities. One of the important results obtained from the stability analysis is the spatial dependence of the (complex) dispersion relationship, which gives the growth rate of bed perturbations. Figure 2 shows growth rates of bed perturbations computed using the imaginary component of the dispersion relationship, for two different locations along the flow path. It is observed that antidunes formed by supercritical conservative density currents, with bedload transport only, tend to elongate, as the maximum growth rate moves towards smaller wavenumbers in the downslope direction. Also, the value of the positive peak of the growth rate tends to decrease in that direction as well, indicating that wave amplitude tends to decrease as the current flows downslope.

Laboratory experiments showed that conservative density currents and depositional turbidity currents are capable of developing bedforms at different scales such as dunes and ripples, as well as long-wavelength antidune-like sediment waves (Fedele, 2003). The laboratory observations in the MARGINS tank indicated that the front of turbidity currents plays an important on the bottom morphology. In particular, in order to be able to model the inception and development of gullies, it is necessary to have a 3-D hydrodynamic model of the flow. This motivated the numerical experiments below.

NUMERICAL RESULTS

A rigorous model for two-way coupled multiphase flow has been developed. The model has been derived formally from the complete two-phase flow models presented in Zhang and Prosperetti (1997) and Balachandar and Ferry (2004). In contrast to the models presented by these authors, the model that we have developed is based on the volume-averaged velocity instead of the continuous phase velocity. In this way, by imposing the divergence-free condition to the velocity field, we satisfy exactly mass conservation since for incompressible phases mass conservation reduces to volume conservation. This feature of the model facilitates its implementation in standard incompressible Navier-Stokes solvers. The derived momentum conservation equations present three terms in addition to the standard equations that account for the two-way coupling between phases. The model is completed by a transport equation for the void fraction, which is transported by the disperse phase velocity. For the disperse phase velocity we have derived a new version of the equilibrium Eulerian method based on the volume-averaged velocity. The derivation of the model was done by expanding all the terms using the small parameters τ and α (particle response time and volume fraction, respectively) and retaining terms O(1), O(τ) and O(α), which makes the model exact to $O(\tau\alpha+\tau^2+\alpha^2)$. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the model is the most sophisticated version of the equilibrium Eulerian method: its innovations include exact multiphase volume conservation, finite settling velocity effects, and the incorporation of volume fraction gradient and Faxén terms.

The derived model has been implemented in a spectral DNS channel flow code, which allows for the detailed resolution of fine-scale features without resorting to subscale modeling. In order to perform two-phase flow computations the code had to be modified substantially.

We have performed 3D simulations for planar and cylindrical configurations (Cantero et al. 2004a) with Gr=1.5 x 10^6 and Gr=1.5 x 10^7. The results are shown in figures 3 and 4. These solutions not only show the Kevin-Helmholtz billows, but also the existence of a fast instability at the front of the current near the vertical boundaries that develops into a complex lobe and clef pattern. We can also observe the existence of an instability that develops at the interface of the current. Figure 5 shows the time evolution of the lobe and cleft instability. In this figure the front is visualized by contours of density. Figure 6 shows the radius of curvature of the front. Dark regions correspond to negative curvatures that are characteristic of clefts. Light color regions correspond to positive curvatures that are characteristic of lobes. Studies generalizing these results to particulate turbidity currents are under way (Cantero et al. 2004b).

IMPACT/APPLICATION

Theoretical analyses supported by laboratory observations have clearly shown the capability of turbidity currents for producing longitudinal small-scale bedforms such as ripples as well as long-wavelength antidunes. Our understanding of the mechanics of bedforms in continental margins until now has been rather limited and full of speculation. We hope that this work will facilitate both the interpretation of the geologic record as well as the design and placement of submarine structures on stable sediment deposits. Our work suggests that turbidity currents could also be a mechanism important for mine burial and should therefore receive more attention, particularly at river mouths where high-sediment discharges can generate such underflows. Our numerical modeling shows that lobes and clefts might very well be related to the inception of submarine channels. However more research is need to verify this hypothesis.

RELATED PROJECTS

We are collaborating with Pat Wiberg, University of Virginia, and Lincoln Pratson, Duke University, to develop and incorporate a field-tested, mechanistic model for sediment erosion into our density current model as part of the EuroStrataform Program.

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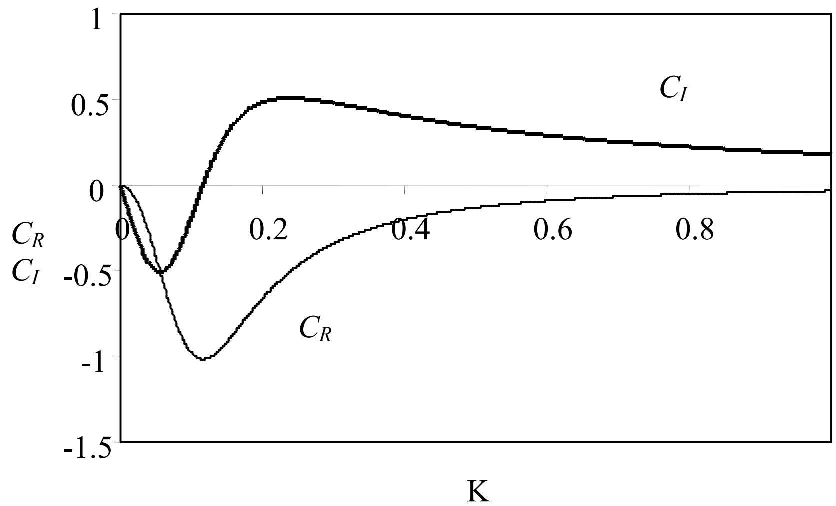

Figure 1. Stability of bed perturbations for a conservative density current with bedload transport. Figure shows imaginary and real components of the celerity of bed perturbations as functions of bedform wave number (x*=0).

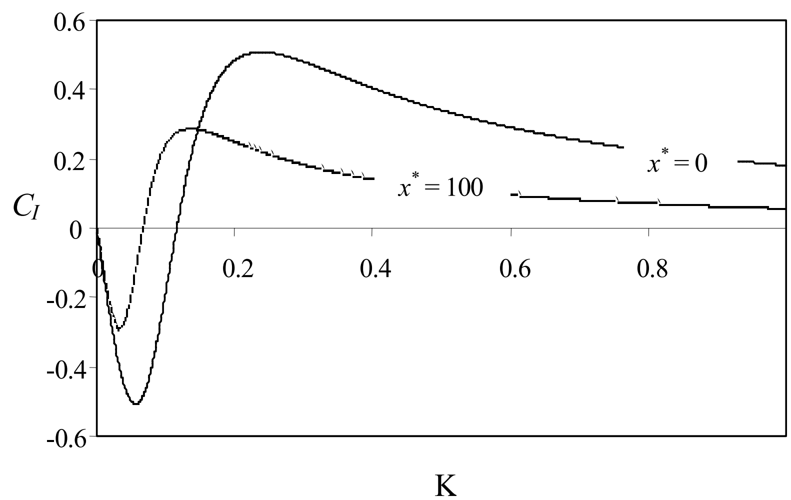

Figure 2. Down slope variation of characteristic wavelength and growth rate.

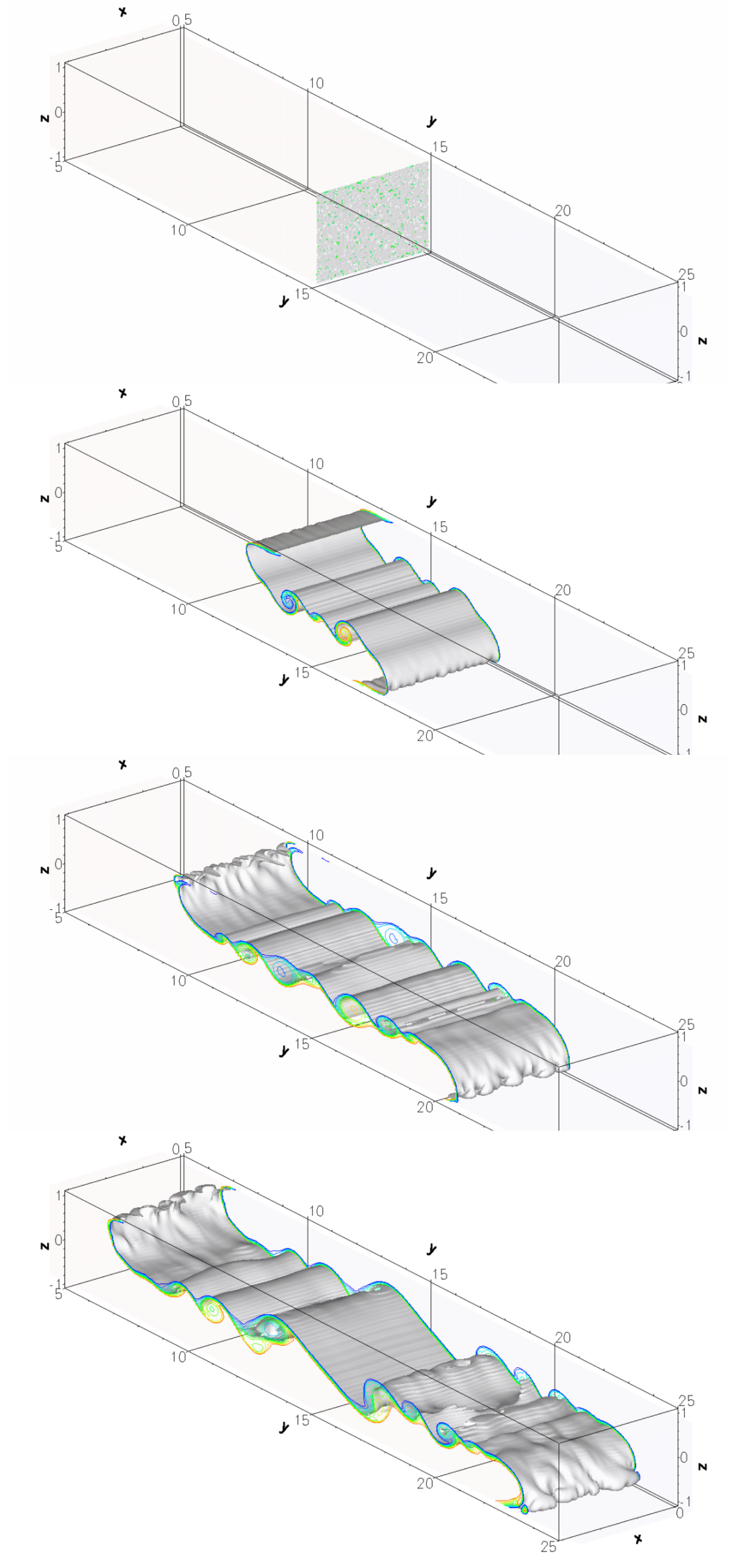

Figure 3. Solution for the 3D planar saline density current, Gr=1.5 x 10^6. From top to bottom t=0, t=5, t=10 and t=15. The surface represents a void fraction isosurface.

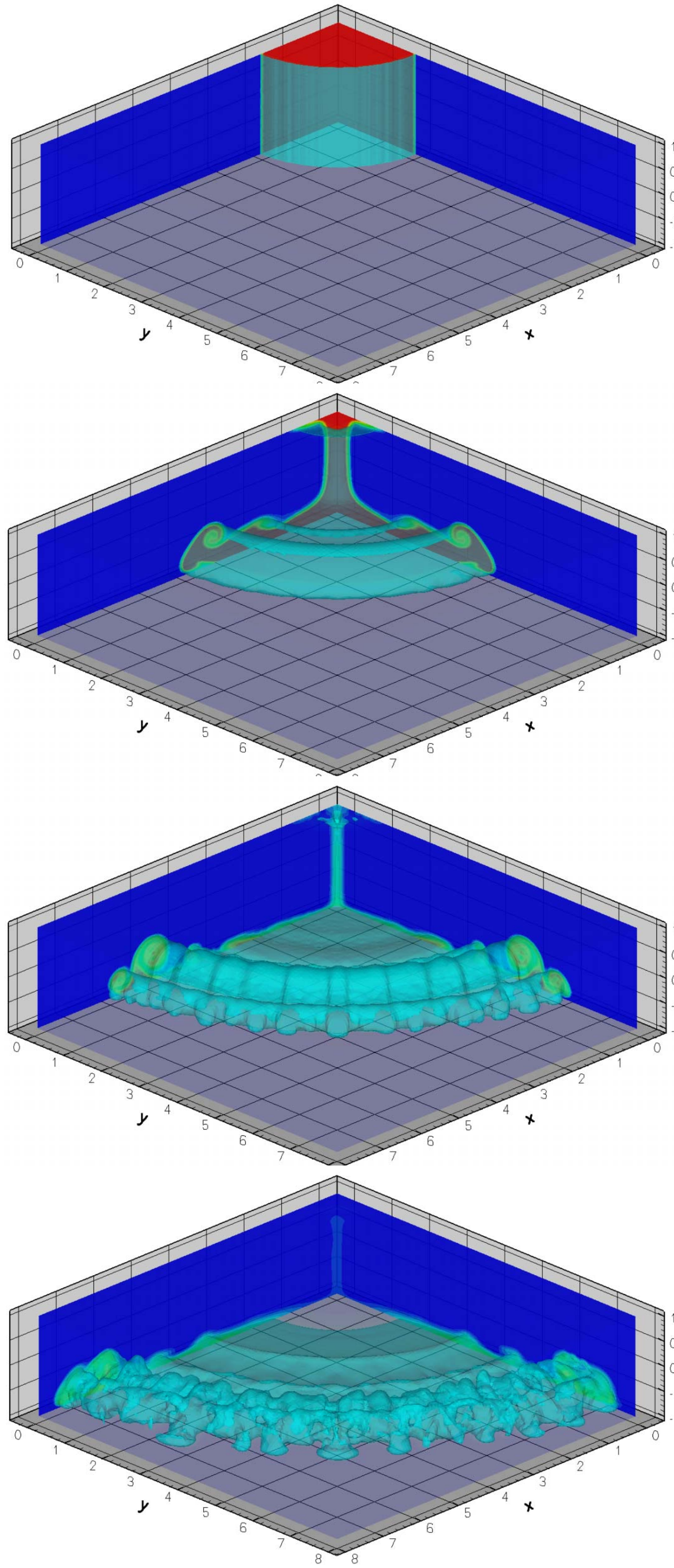

Figure 4. Solution for the 3D cylindric saline density current, Gr=1.5 x 10^6. From top to bottom t=0, t=4, t=8 and t=12. The surface represents a void fraction isosurface.

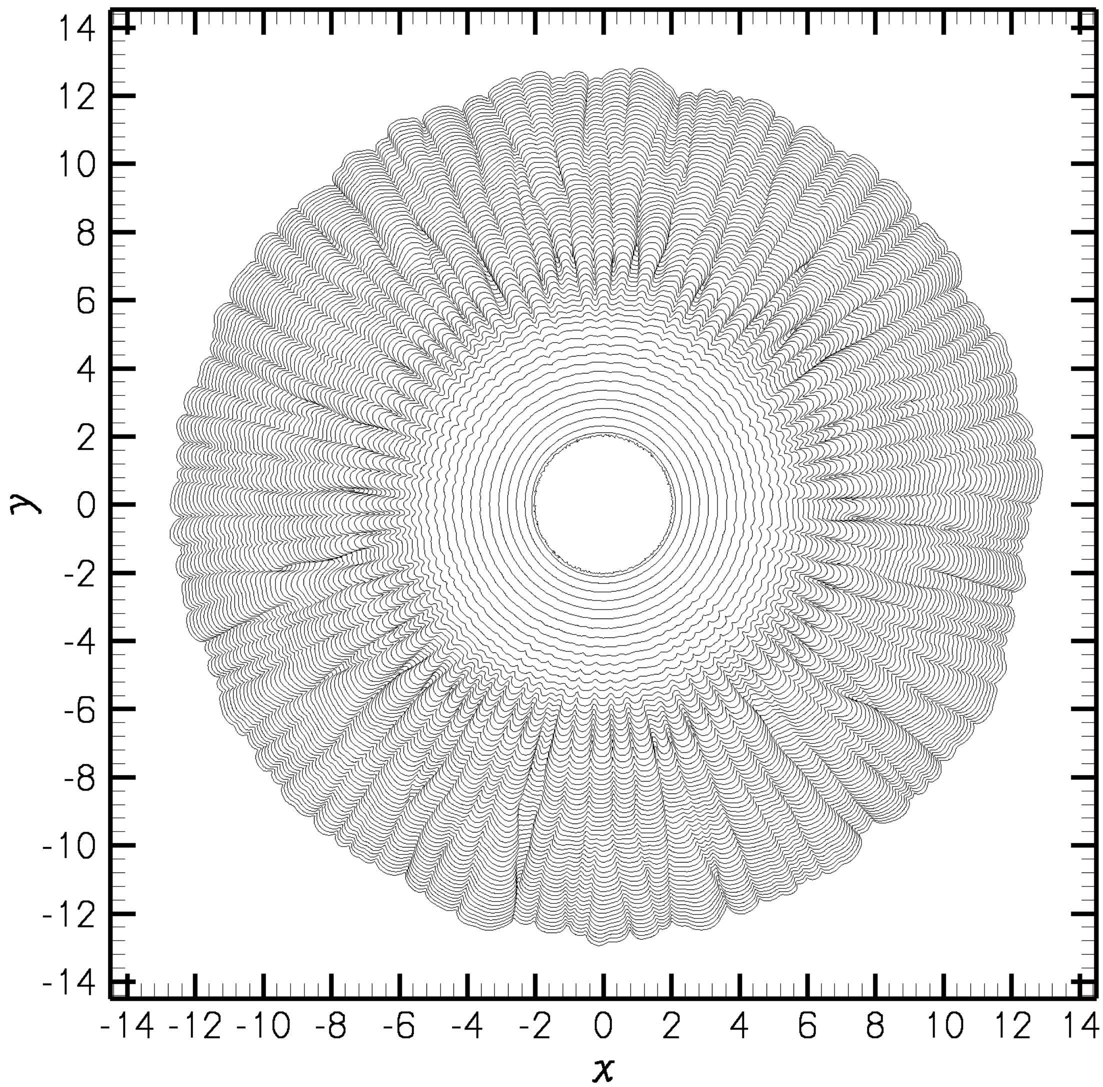

Figure 5. Time evolution of lobe and cleft instabilities visualized by density contours. Solution for the 3D cilindric saline density current, Gr=1.5 x 10^{6}.

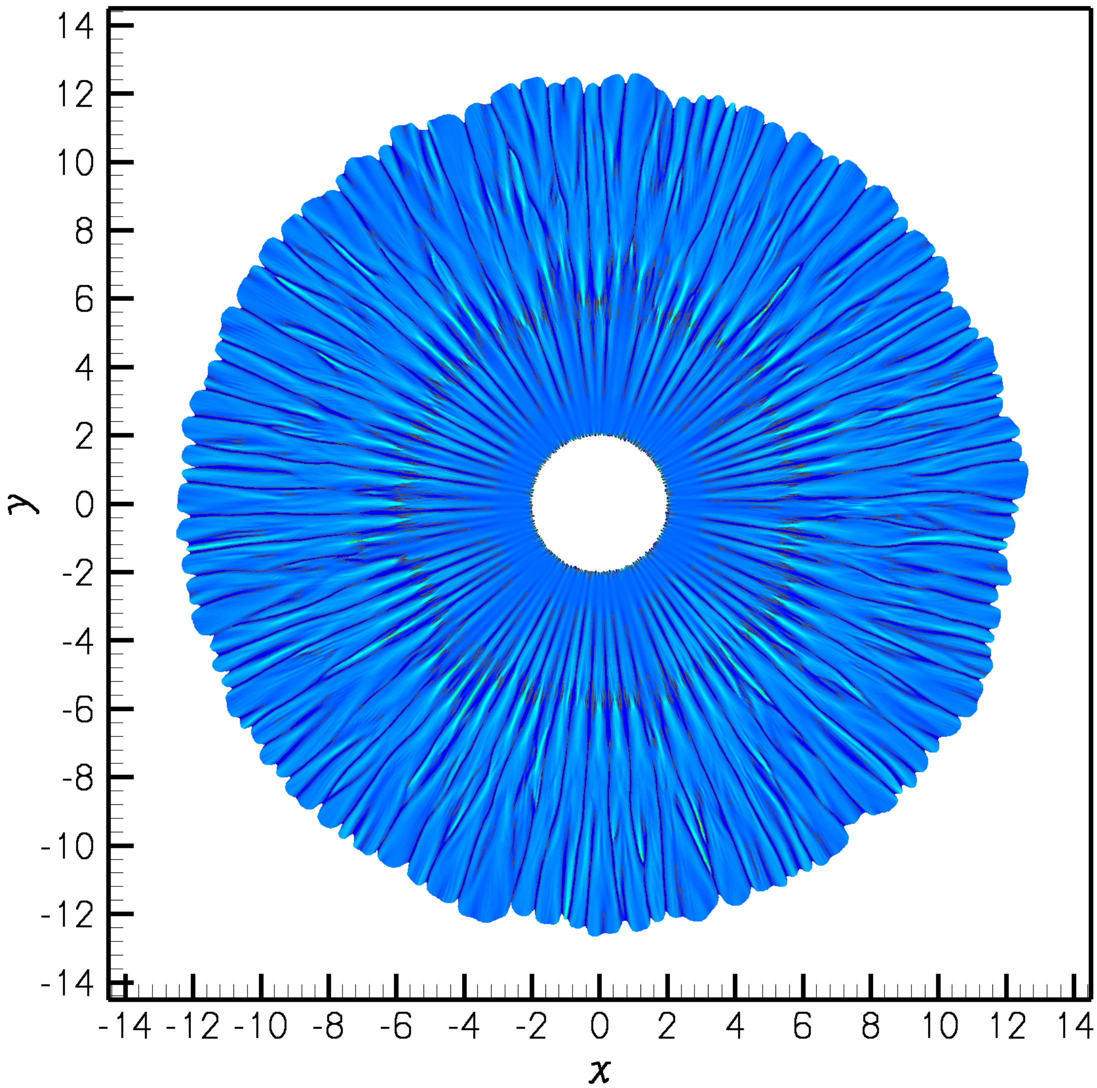

Figure 6. Time evolution of curvature of lobe and cleft instabilities. Solution for the 3D cylindric saline density current, Gr=1.5 x 10^6^.